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A WAY OF LIFE*

by

Charl Ormond Williams
Past President and
Director of Field Service
National Education Association

The work and program of the 4-H Clubs is not unfamiliar to me. Beginning in 1915 and for 8 years thereafter, as county superintendent of schools in Shelby County, Tennessee, of which Memphis is the county seat, my contact with some phase of this work was almost daily. The boys' club agent made my office his headquarters. In a short time after assuming office, a unique arrangement was worked out with the Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture whereby a woman was employed to be both the girls' club agent and the supervisor of home economics and science in the Shelby County Schools. She and I shared the same apartment until I left the county in 1922 to take my present position -- so you can readily understand how closely I kept in touch with the activities of these clubs.

Unfortunately for me, my work has carried me far from those boys and girls, but my interest has never lessened, nor has my faith wavered in what might be accomplished through this far-flung program of the Extension Service.

I think back upon those days with rosy memories, and with good reason. The men and women and school children in those small villages and open country through their understanding and cooperation gave me one opportunity after another for leadership and advancement. I have said many times, and I repeat with emphasis today, that I thank my stars I started out to teach in a one-room country school ten miles from the railroad, and not in Memphis, New York, or Washington. All that experience in the years that followed was truly the good life for me in every sense of the word, and although you may question my giving it up, I want to tell you that everything I have done since, has been focused, directly or indirectly, in an effort to improve the education, health and community life in the small towns, villages and open country throughout the nation.

It was this deep seated, long-standing interest that led me to ask President and Mrs. Roosevelt to lend their support in holding at

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the White House on October 3-5, 1944, the first White House Conference ever held on rural education and rural life - a conference which made history and to which leaders in the Department of Agriculture made notable contributions.

Today is the first opportunity I have had in these 25 years to meet with any 4-H Club members, and it is also my first appearance before such a distinguished, hand-picked group as I know you to be. Much water has gone over the dam in this quarter of a century. Wild prosperity after World War I was followed by world-wide depression. Recovery had just begun when a few leaders here and elsewhere recognized the seeds that were being sown in Europe and Asia for the most devastating war the world has ever known. Throughout it all, the record reveals that the boys and girls in the 4-H Clubs stood by, and made their contribution -- and what a contribution it was! I do not need to recount to you your work in buying and selling War Bonds and Stamps, of raising livestock, and grain, and hay and fiber -- you know it all better than I, and are justly proud of it.

But it is not the work in which you are, and have been engaged, that I want to talk with you about today, but rather the by-products of it, so to speak. You have seen more, heard more, read more, learned more, travelled more, conferred with more leaders in business, industry, agriculture and government than your grandfathers, by and large, ever dreamed of in their youth.

Your clubs are voluntary associations. You were compelled to go to school, if you come from a state which has a law to compel attendance, with teeth in it, and officers to enforce it. No so with your clubs. In these local clubs you have had your first taste of democracy -- of working together, of planning together, of sharing knowledge and experience, of free discussion and wholesome competition, all of which is in the good American tradition. If Thomas Jefferson were alive today, his imagination would be stirred at the thought of nearly 2,000,000 boys and girls in this country -- not to mention the 10,000,000 who have preceded you -- who, like yourselves, are demonstrating that the country is a good and satisfying place to live. There were no big cities in Jefferson's day -- even so, he had some fears about the safebeing of democracy in the hands of men who had been torn from the soil.

What I am interested in finding out is what your predecessors in 4-H Clubs have done, and what you propose to do with the knowledge, skill and experience you have acquired in this work alone, to say nothing of your schooling. Where will you go from here -- and for what purpose?

Every census of our population tells us of the migration of people from the farms to the cities -- Kansas, alone, lost 500,000 people to the cities in the last decade. Some of you will join that procession, partly for the stimulation and excitement you hope to find in the cities, but chiefly, because the country cannot support all of you on the land.

If you carry with you to the city your way of life learned in the country, your presence there will be as a clean, fresh breath of air to the city, whose population is often both regimented and provincial.

When you get to the city, you may be surprised to find that the cherished hope of many of its inhabitants is to earn, and scrimp and save enough to get to the country. Many get no farther than the suburbs, but they, at least, have a little elbow-room, they can have a dog, at ease, a few trees and a garden perhaps, with a view of the sun by day, and the moon and stars by night.

Before you depart for the city, I want you to take a good, long look at the country, and find out what has happened to it in the past 25 to 50 years -- try to see if any significant changes have been made during your very young lives. Very startling changes have been made in the country communities in my lifetime. My mother had six children and the same village doctor brought us all into the world. He had spent his long, useful life there. Today, the nearest doctor to that village lives 15 miles away, and he is overworked.

Just a stone's throw from our home was a "college," so-called, because in its early days it was a church school, and granted something akin to degrees. Today in that 2-story brick building, an elementary school only is maintained. In my youth a trip to Memphis on the "accommodation" train was an experience to talk about for weeks. Some conductors on those trains carried 3 generations of a family to school in the city. Now those accommodation trains run no more. The automobile and the radio have annihilated time and distance, and today members of my family think nothing of running into the city for a picture show.

On one of my trips to Paris I was entertained in a lovely apartment overlooking the river Seine, and as we stood on the tiny balcony at night my hostess pointed out a small island in the river and told me the almost unbelievable story of people she knew who had been born on that little island, and lived all their lives there without ever once leaving it -- and that in the very heart of Paris.

But think of the isolation of our villages and rural communities a few years ago, and of many even today. In my little village there was in my girlhood a woman grown to old age who never had made the journey of 25 miles to Memphis. Finally the day came when she was induced to go. On her return in the late evening in answer to a question about how she enjoyed the trip, she replied gruffly "that she felt just like she had been 'drug' around the globe." Today it is commonplace for two weeks' old babies and aged grandparents to take cross-country trips by airplane.

The second year I taught school, I had made considerable progress for I was then only eight miles from the railroad. The school stood on the edge of a lovely grove of trees with the cemetery just outside the windows. The largest country church I have ever seen stood in that grove -- the building was strong and sturdy and the lines pleasing to the eye. There I went every Sunday and played the organ for a large congregation that came in buggies and wagons and on horseback from the surrounding country. Years later on a visit to the neighborhood I was astounded to learn that not only had that friendly congregation split up, but that the church building had been sawed in two parts, and one-half moved across the road -- all this the net result of an over-dose of denominationalism.

In the long studied look that I am asking you to focus on the rural communities you know, I want you to take stock of the homes, schools, churches and of places for recreation. Then I want to ask if you are satisfied with the outlook, and what you propose to do about it all. If you look for facilities to maintain health and heal the sick, in thousands of villages and rural communities you will find absolutely none.

When you turn your eyes to the schools in many places you will find the same type -- maybe the same building -- that was set up by the pioneers who trudged over the land on foot or toiled their way by ox-drawn wagons. Right in front of many of these little school houses pass high-powered automobiles, or "stream-liners" on the railroad, while overhead fly planes by day and by night carrying passengers and freight from coast to coast. That district school was not designed for this era and the system by which it is administered and supported is as outmoded as the "dodo." Do you boys and girls 16 to 20 years of age not see that now? I cannot, and will not, believe that with everything else you know, you do not see, and understand. This country of ours cannot fulfill its destiny in this troubled world with half its population denied opportunity for adequate education. You who elect to stay in the country -- what will you do about the education, health, recreational and religious life in the country? In a few short years, you will have children of your own to educate. Will you uproot your families and leave behind all you hold dear to move into the city to provide the education for your children that should be considered their birthright -- or will you stand up like free men and demand that the state and the nation aid the rural communities in their efforts to give educational opportunities to all children?

What about you who from choice, or necessity, go into the cities to join the ranks in medicine, law, teaching, banking, business, industry or organized labor? What memories of the country and its needs will you carry with you? What responsibility will you take for seeing that the cities discharge their debt to the hinterland?

City folk have been slow, even "pig-headed," in recognizing their dependence upon the country. In the first place, cities do not produce enough children to maintain themselves. Population experts know if it were not for the influx of people from the country to the city, that the cities would pass off the map -- and that, in a measurable length of time. Most of the city dwellers know that their eggs, butter, milk, vegetables, meat, wool, cotton, and linen for clothing, lumber, brick and steel for their homes and other raw products for their industries come from somewhere beyond the city limits, but they have not been concerned about the people who produced these things to meet their daily needs, or the conditions under which they were produced.

They came very close to a realization of their dependence on the country during the recent railroad strike. I was stranded in Denver at the time, and like most of such travellers, I bought the extras as they rolled from the presses. We read first of factories being shut down from lack of raw materials to work with, and thousands of men and women thrown out of work. Following on the heels of this news came stories of inventories of food. One city had a few days' supply of certain foods, another a four days' supply of coal, all the others that I noted measured their supplies in terms of a few weeks. The word, month, did not appear

in a single item I read. A few more days of that strike and the cities would have been brought to their knees, and the country to a standstill.

In our campaign through the years for federal aid to education the cities have howled about the taxes they have paid into the federal government and what such aid would cost them, without once recognizing that they would have no taxes to pay in most instances if it were not for the raw materials from the country to keep their industries going. I cannot name one big banker, manufacturer, corporation president or lawyer who has raised his voice in behalf of such legislation. On the contrary, they have stoutly opposed it.

Twenty-five years ago there was one merchant prince in Boston who understood the economics of this situation and he did all in his power to arouse his associates in the United States Chamber of Commerce, but in those lush days his efforts were as a voice crying in the wilderness. No one has yet appeared to take his place and the campaign for federal aid to education is still not won.

Cities have other ways of levying tribute on people from the hinterland. I have crossed this country many times, and not once in all my life have I been able to go through Chicago without having to stay in that city from one hour to one day before I could go on my way. Other passengers since that city became a railroad center have been forced against their will to do the same thing. In this way, they have poured millions of dollars annually into the coffers of the city through shines, shaves, shows, meals, taxis, tips, hotel rooms, reading matter, souvenirs and other purchases they could well have done without.

We cannot lay all the blame on the cities, however, for the plight of the country. Honesty and justice call upon us to ascertain if rural people themselves have made the effort they could have made to improve the specific conditions in country life to which I have called attention. Again, I draw upon my own knowledge and experience to illustrate this point. Before I became county superintendent, the consolidation of one-room schools had been going on steadily in my county. In one section of the county was a group of 5 one-room schools fairly close together which would have been consolidated a decade earlier, had not the farmers resisted -- one even threatened to shoot on sight the wagonette driver (there were no busses in those days) if he appeared in the neighborhood. I happen to belong to a breed that believes when things should be done, somebody ought to try to get them done, so I took a hand in the matter and opened up again the question of consolidating those five schools and housing the children in a \$25,000 high school building in the center of the group. I talked the matter over with two of the leading men in two of the small communities, one of whom was on the county board of education, and both of whom were members of the county court -- a body which elects the county superintendent of schools. The situation as far as my future was concerned was hazardous, to say the least.

Although these two good men were skeptical of the outcome, they acceded to my request that a picnic be organized for all the communities on the central site chosen for the proposed big, new school. The day came, and when a board member and I drove out from Memphis to the picnic we found the host divided into two hostile camps. Half of the communities pitched their tents, so to speak, on one side of the road, and the other half across the road. Neither group spoke to the other. We, of course, visited each group and were looked upon as traitors to both. One good woman told me she would rather see her children in their coffins than to have them ride two miles in the wagonette to school. The picnic was a "bust" as you can see.

Nothing daunted, this school board member who had been recently appointed offered to take a hand in the matter alone. He proposed a night meeting in one of the school houses to which all were invited. Friday night came and the house was packed. Powerful and Lincolnesque in appearance, and simple and appealing in speech he was so persuasive that the audience could not stand out against the consolidation. They accepted his personal check for \$500.00 as a gift toward the purchase of the school site and he motored back to his home in the country with a feeling of great triumph. I shall always remember his entrance into my office the following Monday morning, when he told me with a chuckle that the first letter on his arrival at his office was from the people of that meeting who had returned his check with a nice letter telling him that they had backed out. That very day the two men came into my office together and told me that if I would just give them each a \$5,000 school, everybody would be satisfied. That would have been an easy solution, but I could not agree to it. My business was not to satisfy some grown-ups whose ideas were rooted in the past, but to try to provide for their children, at least, the education that was being given the other children in the county. So the fight went on through many stages, but the time came when the new building stood on the new site, and people came from miles around on the night of its dedication. Everybody was proud and happy and those two men stood up and made speeches with tears in their eyes, thanking us all for not acceding to their demands. Since that day a \$25,000 addition has been added to the school.

Incidents similar to this have occurred in hundreds of communities over the country but many did not have such a happy ending.

Rural people who number half of our population must raise their sights and plan for their future in a totally new and, sometimes, terrifying world with the same courage and determination as they planned for their past. The very future of our country depends upon the course they pursue.

When our federal government was established, farmers made up nine-tenths of the total population, and rural people are still the "cradle" of the nation. A population expert, Dr. O.E. Baker tells us that "in three generations 80 percent of the total population of our country will be direct descendants of those now living on farms in the United States." These statements are weighted with heavy and inescapable

responsibilities for the young people of your generation. I tell you frankly that our best hopes for the future lie in you. What group of young people are better fitted to become the thinkers and leaders in rebuilding rural life than those like yourselves who have had practical experience, good education, wise counsellors and unusual opportunities early in your lives?

Rural people have not been powerless in the past. Long ago they took hold of the farm problems of their day, and many years ahead of either labor or business, they forged ahead and had created in Washington a Department of Agriculture with a secretary in the President's Cabinet. This great agency housed in palatial buildings is carrying on a nationwide program of service to farm men and women, and to farm boys and girls, in cooperation with the state colleges of agriculture.

A century ago farmers began to organize -- and they are organized today. A farm press has grown up, and some of those farm papers and magazines have celebrated their hundredth birthday.

There is a saying on Capitol Hill in Washington that when the farmers get together, and get behind what they want, they can sweep everything before them.

The progress that you young people make in rebuilding rural life will depend to a large degree on your skillful use of these three huge resources, the Department of Agriculture, the farm press and the farm organizations, and others that are yours to command.

A ferment is going on in a number of rural states today. Join now with those people who are responsible for it and do not let your efforts flag until the facilities for education, health, religion, and recreation are soundly established and made available to people in rural communities. Each of you must have a part in the great enterprise. I can promise you plenty of excitement, as well as undying satisfaction if you carry it through.

With the decentralization of industry now on the horizon, with all the means of transportation and communication at your command, with all the modern conveniences for homes and farms, if I were starting out life anew, I would stake my chances on the country, whether I chose medicine, teaching, business, farming or one of a number of occupations. At the end of your active days, you may not have amassed a fortune, though that is not impossible; but you can amass rich memories and experiences that money cannot buy. Such is my faith in Rural America today, and in you young people from the farms who will be numbered among the leaders of tomorrow.

